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ABSTRACT

This digest explores the literature related to journal writing from various disciplines, including psychology, language studies, outdoor education, and experiential education. Although journal writing has been around since ancient times, it was not until the early 1960s that it flourished as a learning tool. Instructors from a wide range of disciplines use journal writing in various contexts. Outdoor educators use journal writing to assist students in deepening their observations about their surroundings, and experiential educators use it to facilitate reflection. Journal writing helps students construct their own knowledge and develop creativity, writing skills, critical thinking, and observation skills. Problems with journal writing include: overuse, students writing to please the teacher, purely descriptive writing, and socially inappropriate uses of journals. Recommendations for educators who want to use journals focus on offering feedback and workshops to improve journal writing skills, recognizing students' varying interests in and perceptions of journal writing, setting aside semi-structured time for journal writing, modeling good journal writing behavior, exploring multiple ways of evaluating journals, establishing a trusting relationship between journal writer and reader, and coordinating journal writing assignments with other instructors. (Contains 19 references) (TD)

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Journal Writing in Experiential Education: Possibilities, Problems, and Recommendations (ERIC Digest)

Janet E. Dyment and Timothy S. O'Connell

September 2003

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Journal Writing in Experiential Education: Possibilities, Problems, and Recommendations

by Janet E. Dyment and Timothy S. O'Connell

Educators who work in the field of experiential education often encourage or require their students to keep journals. Journals are a time-honored venue for facilitating reflection, an important component of experiential education (Bennion & Olsen, 2002; Priest & Gass, 1997). Despite their popularity, however, surprisingly little is published about the theory and practice of journal writing in experiential education.

The purpose of this Digest is to explore the literature related to journal writing from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, language studies, outdoor education, and experiential education. It begins with a discussion of the history of journal writing, and then explores the possibilities and potential problems of the journal writing process. This Digest concludes with several recommendations for educators who use journals in their teaching.

Evolution of Journal Writing

The recording of daily events, personal reflections, questions about the environment, and reactions to experiences has been an enduring human practice. Some of the earliest journal writers included the Greeks and Romans, women of 10th-century Japan, and "enlightened" individuals during the Renaissance. Among the greatest historical influences on contemporary journal writing in North America have been the recorded accounts of explorers such as Lewis and Clark and John Wesley Powell. Writers such as Gilbert White, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Anne Frank, Margaret Mead, and Aldo Leopold have also impacted modern journal writing. It was not until the early 1960s that researchers recognized the value of journal writing in educational settings. Since then, the use of journal writing as a learning exercise has flourished (Janesick, 1998; Moutoux, 2002; Raffan & Barrett, 1989).

Instructors from a wide range of disciplines have used journal writing in various contexts. English and literature teachers often ask students to record their thoughts and feelings about stories or to deconstruct what the author is saying (Cole, 1994). Instructors in teacher education programs and psychology require students to write about how they connect course content to practice (Anderson, 1993; Hettich, 1990). Researchers have examined how journal writing impacted business students' listening behaviors and related thoughts about how they could improve those skills (Johnson & Barker, 1995). Journal writing has been used with nontraditional students and women who have returned to school in adult degree programs (Walden, 1995). While many instructors ask *individual* students to keep journals, some teachers have found *group* journals to be an effective exercise as well (Kohut, 1998).

Outdoor and experiential educators also have used journal writing in a variety of ways. Natural science and environmental educators use journals to assist students in deepening their observations about their surroundings (Hammond, 2002). Perhaps one of the most popular uses of journals is to reflect on experiences that occur outside the traditional classroom, such as internships, student teaching, field trips, and expeditionary learning activities (Raffan & Barrett, 1989). Instructors also use journal writing to help students reflect on self-discovery, group dynamics, professional development, sense of place, and academic theory, as well as to record such factual information as weather conditions, activities of group members, flora, fauna, times, and locations.

Possible Benefits

It is not surprising that journals are used so often in experiential education, given their generally recognized benefits. One of the most recognized uses is to help facilitate reflection, a critical component of the experiential education cycle. Through journals, students can record a concrete experience, reflect on and record their observations about the experience, integrate the observation into abstract concepts or theories, and use the theories to make decisions or solve problems. Writing helps students to construct their own knowledge by allowing them to express connections between new information and knowledge they already have.

Journal writing also can improve students' writing, enhance critical thinking skills, encourage observational skills, and develop creative skills. Journal writing helps students develop their writing skills as they are encouraged to "experiment with writing, to experience, perhaps for the first time, writing that may be highly personal, relatively unstructured, speculative, uninhibited, tentative, in process, in flux" (Anderson, 1993, p. 305). As a result of this freedom and success, students often take pride in their journals.

From an environmental perspective, journals can help students develop intimate connections with the more-than-human world as they learn to observe and record patterns and processes in the natural world.

Problems

Despite the numerous benefits associated with journal writing, several problems should be mentioned. Major concerns identified in the literature include (1) the overuse of journals, which results in students feeling "journaled to death" (Anderson, 1993, p. 306) and that journals are "a pointless ritual wrapped in meaningless words" (Shor, 1992, p. 83); (2) students writing "whatever pleases the instructor" (Anderson, 1993, p. 305) in order to get a good grade; (3) students writing purely descriptive entries, with limited reflection (Kerka, 1996); (4) misuse of journals, in which students attack other students or make inappropriate comments about other students (Anderson, 1993); (5) limited training opportunities for students to learn more about journal writing

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(Dyment & O'Connell, in press-b); (6) the overreliance on journals as a reflective tool; as well as (7) the challenges associated with evaluating journals (Chandler, 1997; Moutoux, 2002).

Recommendations for Educators Who Want to Use Journals

The literature about journal writing offers several recommendations.

1. ***Offer thorough and detailed feedback.*** Educators who want to capitalize on the potential of journal writing must be willing to spend the time and effort to offer students feedback on the substance of their journal entries (Anderson, 1993). Feedback will also help students identify their own areas of strengths and weaknesses in journal writing (e.g., writing technique, making connections to theory).
2. ***Improve students' journal writing skills by offering workshops.*** Educators who include journals in the curriculum would be wise to offer students formal and informal training in journal writing (Dyment & O'Connell, 2003). Educators may also consider giving students loose guidelines to help focus their writing. For example, students may be asked to write a poem or draw a concept map that explains their understanding of the subject of study, or write from the perspective of another person or object involved in an experience.
3. ***Recognize that students will have varying interests in journal writing.*** While many students will be generally supportive of journal writing, it is important to remember that some students may dislike journal writing (Shor, 1992). Educators should consider offering alternative means of facilitating reflection (e.g., video journals, focus group debriefing sessions, Web pages).
4. ***Recognize the different ways that males and females perceive journal writing.*** It appears that males and females have different perceptions of journal writing. Females often are more open and receptive to the journal writing process (Burt, 1994; Dyment & O'Connell, in press-a). Some males may need additional training to feel comfortable with journal writing as a reflective technique. Positive, constructive feedback from educators may influence how males perceive their journals and may lead to a more powerful reflective experience (Dyment & O'Connell, in press-a).
5. ***Set aside semi-structured time for journal writing.*** If educators truly value journals, they must remember to provide adequate time for reflection and writing (Dyment & O'Connell, in press-b).
6. ***Model good journal writing behavior.*** In addition to providing time for journal writing, educators should model good journal writing behaviors. If an educator is supportive of the journal writing process, keeps a daily journal, and helps to facilitate reflective activities, then students may have more positive experiences with journal writing (Dyment & O'Connell, in press-b).
7. ***Consider alternative models for evaluating journals.*** Educators should explore multiple ways of evaluating journal writing, including self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and coevaluation (i.e., student and teacher) as alternative methods (Chandler, 1997; Moutoux, 2002). Educators also might consider allowing students to choose the percentage of the final grade that their journal is worth.
8. ***Establish a trusting relationship between the journal writer and the journal reader.*** It appears that trust is a critical factor that influences student perceptions and behaviors of journal writing. Educators must work hard to develop trusting relationships with their students to maximize the potential of journal writing (Dyment & O'Connell, in press-b).
9. ***Avoid journal writing students "to death."*** Educators must coordinate journal writing assignments with other instructors who ask students to write journals to ensure they are not overused. Instructors within the same department or institution may consider allowing students to keep a single journal for a number of classes, or ask students to reflect in other ways (Anderson, 1993).

While journal writing holds great potential for enhancing learning in experiential education, for this potential to be fully realized, educators must recognize potential pitfalls and develop effective strategies for avoiding them.

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